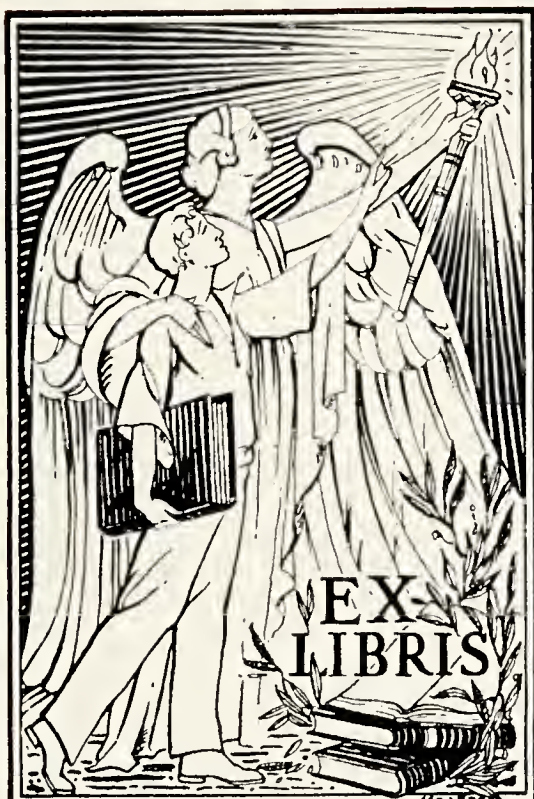


AN AMAZING BLIND GIRL
(WILLETTA HUGGINS)

Crissey, Forrest

Hv1792

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HOUSE FOR THE BLIND**



WEARING HER BEST GOWN, WHICH SHE MADE BY USING HER SENSE OF TOUCH IN PLACE OF EYES



IN ROMPING THROUGH THE GROVE, WILLETTA'S ACUTE SENSE OF SMELL SERVES HER IN PLACE OF SIGHT



WILLETTA HUGGINS

An Amazing Blind Girl

Who Hears by Touch and Sees by Smell

By FORREST CRISSEY

Ladies Home Journal, December, 1921



SHE ENJOYS PLAYING BALL, AND PREFERS ALL THE OUT-OF-DOOR GAMES



WILLETTA HEARS SUPT. HOOPER THROUGH HER SENSE OF TOUCH

WITHIN the pleasant walls of the Wisconsin School for the Blind, at Janesville, is perhaps the most remarkable young girl of her kind in America. Willetta Huggins is totally deaf and blind, although born with both hearing and sight. Until the dark curtain completely cut off her vision, she was dull, morose and altogether unhappy. This change occurred less than a year ago; to-day she is keen, alert, studious and irrepressibly happy. Her liberation from the groping, suffering life of childhood came with the total loss of hearing and of sight. Since the elimination of both these senses she has learned more and lived more than in all her life before.

In order to grasp the astounding contradiction presented by this girl of sixteen, it is well, at the start, to set her achievements over against her limitations, after the manner of "deadly parallel."

Although as deaf as any living person, she hears—without mechanical or artificial aid—more readily than most persons whose hearing is considered perfect. While her eyes are as sightless as her thumbs, she can identify colors as quickly and as accurately as an artist, can walk through an unfamiliar grove without touching a tree and can identify any person of her acquaintance at a distance of several feet.

Impossible? So it seemed to me until I met her and saw these contradictions demonstrated beyond question.

Wishing to have an unprejudiced witness present at the interview, I took with me a sister-in-law, whose home is in Janesville.

We waited in the reception room of the Wisconsin School for the Blind and were soon greeted by Superintendent J. T. Hooper. A moment later a rather shy and stocky young girl entered the room, went directly to the superintendent and placed her hand on his head.

After introducing her callers, Mr. Hooper said: "Willetta, can you tell us the color of this lady's skirt?"

Instantly the girl dropped to her knees, pressed the garment to her nostrils for a moment and then, without the slightest hesitation said: "Blue, black and white."

The skirt was a plaid and all the colors in it had been correctly identified.

Guiding the fingers of his charge to a narrow embroidered leaf Superintendent Hooper again asked: "And what color is this?"

"Oh, that is green," promptly replied Willetta as her nose brushed the fragment of embroidery.

"Are you sure that is the only color?" he inquired.

A slight flush showed in the cheeks of the girl, as if she had been caught in a blunder. This time she held the leaf to her nostrils for several seconds before she answered: "There's a little thread of black about the edge of it."

Her answer was correct; the line of black about the edge was so fine as to escape notice at a casual glance.

"Now," suggested Mr. Hooper to me, "suppose you talk with her yourself and ask any questions you choose."

Fun? Lots of It

WITH the intent to put the girl at her ease, in a low, conversational voice I asked: "Do you have any fun here?"

This brought an amused little laugh from her and the response: "Yes; of course—lots of it. But all the other girls are away now on their summer vacations. When they're here, we play all kinds of games. I like the running games out of doors myself."

"You run out of doors?" I asked in astonishment. "Don't you run into the trees? Certain parts of the yard are full of them."

Willetta broke into a hearty laugh at this. It seemed to amuse her immensely. "Why, of course I don't," she exclaimed. "I can smell 'em."

This statement provoked an invitation to go outside and give her callers first-hand proof of its correctness. I led her out into the big yard, turned her face directly toward a grove of trees and then asked her to walk straight ahead. This she did without the slightest hesitation. A large tree stood directly in her path, and I held my breath for fear that she would collide with it. But when within about three feet of the elm she turned and circled it and then wound her way deftly between the other trees beyond it. Just as this surprising feat was finished, Superintendent Hooper beckoned to two women who were passing the grove along the drive.

They were about ten feet away from Willetta when he signaled them to stop and then, placing her hand on his head, he asked: "Who's here now? Who just joined us out here?"

"Why, Minnie and Mrs. D——"

Willetta's hand was then shifted to the head of her caller, who asked: "Is it easier to identify things and persons outdoors or inside the house?"

"Outdoors," came the quick reply. "Smells are much clearer outside than in a room. They are not so mixed up and confused. But I can always tell who is sitting or standing in a room if I know them, and I can tell if there are strangers too."

Marveling at the uncanny acuteness of this girl's sense of smell, I followed her into the house and into the office of the institution. Noticing that a cat was preening itself near the desk, some distance away, I again placed Willetta's hand on my head and asked: "What's in the room—anything besides ——"

"Why, the old cat." This was said in an amused tone, implying that the question was rather absurd.

After conversation had been resumed and continued for several minutes and the presence of the cat forgotten, Willetta suddenly remarked: "The cat has gone out."

Not one of the persons in the room, who were able to see and hear, had noticed the exit of the animal, but its going had been detected by this deaf and blind girl whose delicately sensitive nostrils serve her as eyes.

Tells Colors in Nature

THE development of Willetta's sense of smell," remarked Superintendent Hooper, "has been steady and almost as astonishing to us who are with her as it could be to those who see her only occasionally. At the start, which is to say after she became totally blind, she was apparently able to identify only dyed colors, as in fabrics and somewhat similar materials. She insisted that she could not identify colors in nature, as for example in flowers.

"Then, too, she seemed to stick to the primary colors at the outset, not attempting to differentiate between shades."

"May I put her ability to tell colors in nature to a little test?" I inquired.

This permission was given, and I stepped outside and picked a white hydrangea bloom. Holding this a few inches from her nostrils, I asked her to name its colors.

The answer was "White."

"There is scarcely a day now," resumed Superintendent Hooper, "when Willetta does not give us a surprise along the line of the development of her sense of smell in connection with her ability to identify colors. Just the other day one of the matrons brought

(Continued on Page 131)

SYNOPSIS—Eve Chamberlain, because she has been successful in war work, thinks she can prove to her friends that she can be successful in business. Over the protests of her sweetheart and without telling her father of her plans, she goes to New York to "make a name for herself."

II



VE CHAMBERLAIN had been in the habit of blithely remarking that she "knew New York." Of course she knew Broadway and Fifth Avenue and Central Park and Carnegie Hall, and the best hotels and the best restaurants and the best shops. As a pretty and affluent young person from the Middle West, she had been treated kindly by New York on the occasions of her many visits.

But now New York was turning to her a new face, not exactly inimical but certainly indifferent. She was not stopping at an expensive hotel. She was not shopping in the big shops. In short, she was no longer an affluent young person. She was merely a strange girl occupying the "top floor back" of a west-side rooming house. She was still young and still pretty, but she was frightened, and her growing panic showed in the new, drawn lines of her face.

This panic was justifiable. She had been in New York two weeks and she had not yet found work. She had brought very little money with her, only what cash she happened to have when she left home; and this, after she had paid her fare, was less than thirty dollars. She had brought with her none of the traditional jewels of the heroine of fiction. In short, as she now bitterly admitted to herself, she had been extremely foolish. In her haste to get away from the house before her father returned on that memorable evening—she had expected him to be home for dinner—she had not stopped to think clearly.

To remain indefinitely a working girl had been no part of her vague plan. She merely wished to prove that she had enough ability to support herself in a new community for, at the most, a few months. As soon as she had demonstrated that she could do this, she would be ready to go home. "Economic independence" was not her slogan. It was, in fact, no part of her thoughts or plans. She would regain her threatened self-respect by showing herself and a few others that her ability had a market value in the world. Even after the upheaval of the past twenty-four hours she had little doubt that she could do this and do it soon. On the train to New York she got so far as to put a definite time limit to the experiment. She would resign and go home on the day she was offered a raise of salary.

She had learned something during her experience in Binghamton. She secured a cheap room in a respectable part of the city and then went directly to a collegiate bureau to file her application for a situation as general office assistant.

Her interview with the manager of the bureau, a Miss Elliott, was rather depressing. No, she did not know shorthand, and her typewriting, though conscientious, was highly temperamental. No, she had had no experience in New York, and she had brought no letters of reference from the home town in which her brief office experience had been gained. No, she had not even graduated from college. She had been there three years. Then her mother had died, and she had gone home to be with her father.

THE office manager, who was a thin, eyeglassed woman, somewhat similar in type to Lucy Martin but much older, seemed depressed by these revelations. She accepted the blank the candidate had filled out and shook a doubtful head at it.

"Situations are not as easy to get as they were," she austere mentioned. "Anyone could get a job in wartime and right after the war, and rattle round in it, and draw a salary for—for —"

Eve helped her out. "For rattling?" she suggested more cheerfully than she felt.

But the office manager's features did not relax. "Exactly," she placidly agreed, "for rattling"—she rubbed it in—"for going through the motions of work, for pretending one was doing something. Now we're changing all that. The managers of offices are demanding real workers; trained, conscientious workers. They're getting rid of the parasites in the business world."

She happened to meet the eyes of the applicant as she spoke, and something in their expression surprised and even touched her.

"However," she added briskly, "I will enter your application, of course, and let you know if anything comes up. Have you a telephone?"

"No." Eve was not even sure there was a telephone in her lodging house. She realized now that she should have investigated this matter and made a note of the instrument's number, if there was an instrument. "But I can come here to the office every morning."



"WHEN YOU'RE READY TO COME HOME, WILL YOU LET ME COME AND GET YOU?"

The Primrose Path

By ELIZABETH JORDAN

Illustrations by Richard Vincent Culter

The office manager opened her lips to speak and then rather slowly closed them.

"You would better get the leading newspapers every morning," she advised not unkindly, "and read the 'help-wanted' ads, the kind listed under 'professional situations.' You could be a social secretary, I suppose, or a companion, or a reader to invalids, or something of that kind."

Eve's face brightened, then clouded again. It was gratifying to know that she could be those things. She had not suspected it. On the other hand, they did not quite suit her purpose. After all, it was more than a mere livelihood she was seeking.

"I'd rather have a place in the business or professional world," she mentioned. "Some place where I could advance."

She carried out of the office a disheartening memory of the smile with which the manager had met these words. She did not enjoy the memory, but she walked slowly uptown, reflecting upon it.

IT WAS only eleven o'clock in the morning. She could not endure even the prospect of returning to the little top floor back, though it had seemed a welcome refuge on the previous day after leaving the hotel in which she had spent the night following her arrival. She had put in six hours in a subsequent quest for a room. The top floor back was reasonably clean and would be only eight dollars a week. Her room at the hotel, the cheapest room she could procure, had cost four dollars for one night. An additional dollar a day would buy her meals at an automat restaurant; but even this small expense would soon exhaust her funds.

She had breakfasted on a cup of coffee and a roll, which of course was not wise. She had often warned her boys against doing that very thing. She herself had tested Binghamton's automats to be sure their food was good and wholesome. She had invited a specialist to talk to the boys one night about getting the most nourishing food for the least money. She must try to recall all he had said. She would surely need that knowledge.

She found herself passing the Public Library on her way uptown and, on a sudden impulse, entered it and sought a quiet table in a reading room. Remembering the advice she had just received, she studied the advertising columns of leading newspapers and made a note of the addresses of those needing the kind of help she could supply. It was quite a long list, and she was almost happy when she was making it. Surely, among so many vacant posts there must be one for her.

When the list was complete she wrote by themselves on a second slip of paper the addresses which were nearest to the library, and her spirits mounted even higher. She would call at these places at once. She would call at address after address till she found work. What else had she to do? Her first intention of waiting for the bureau to place her she now realized had been absurd.

She had no time to lose.

In the hours that followed, Eve Chamberlain had many new experiences. She was treated without deference, not once or twice, but many times. She came for the first time into contact with the august office boy who kept her waiting till he had time to notice her, and with the detached telephone operator who was too busy to speak to her, and with the arrogant underling who was passing on to his chief the applicants he considered most promising and who plainly revealed his conviction that she was not among them. In several places she waited an hour or more, only to learn that the post was filled and that her wait had been forgotten by the busy or near-busy workers.

THERE were, of course, high lights in the experience. There were occasional courtesy, interest and kindness. One such instance was offered by a young telephone girl who was chewing gum as Eve approached, and who removed the gum and stuck it under her desk, that its presence in her mouth might not hamper the offering of well-meant advice.

"Beat it, sister," she urged in a whisper, though the two girls were alone in the anteroom of the suite of offices Eve was visiting. "Beat it, and beat it quick. They may give you the job, but take it from me, they won't give you nothin' else. The cash box is on the blink, an' I'm leavin' Saturday."

At five o'clock Eve walked into the automat restaurant and centered her thoughts on the difficult choice between hash and eggs. She had eaten no luncheon, and the breakfast coffee and roll had long ago ceased to exercise any sustaining power they may have possessed. She selected poached eggs, bread and butter and a baked apple, and was quite pleased with herself until she realized that she had dropped all of fifty cents into the slot to pay for her banquet. In the brief feeling of repletion the meal gave her she was sure she should have omitted the extravagance of the baked apple.

The next morning a cold rain was falling. She had brought an umbrella but no rubbers; so she spent a dollar for these necessary articles, and, after a twenty-cent breakfast, took a trolley car for the library. It was cheaper to ride than to walk and ruin her gown. The big reading room seemed like home when she reached it. She made her list, but she felt an actual physical pang at the prospect of repeating yesterday's experience.

IN THE dim hope of avoiding it she went first to the collegiate bureau.

There the office manager remotely shook her head. "Nothing," she said. "You mustn't expect anything for a week or two, perhaps much longer. And you can save time, you know, by telephoning me every morning instead of coming here."

Eve flushed and tried to laugh. "My time is not worth much just now," she reminded the other.

But she took the hint and telephoned on alternate days. Between times she called in person. She had decided that, if she could stand the strain of her triweekly rebuff, Miss Elliott could certainly endure the strain of administering it.

On closer acquaintance Gertrude Elliott proved not to be a bad sort. True to her type, she despised applicants who had no special training, but she showed herself human and listened with an understanding nod to Eve's recitals of her experiences as applicant.

These, like the girl's days, were much the same. Every morning, sustained by her list, she went forth to interview men who wanted office assistants. But none of them wanted her. They wanted stenographers, bookkeepers, file clerks. They wanted trained workers. Several of them showed a passing interest in Eve's youth and beauty. One or two of them leered at her. But she successfully escaped the kind of experience of which she had heard so much and which she subconsciously feared.

"Men are pretty decent on the whole," Gertrude Elliott summed up when Eve touched on this phase of her quest.

An Amazing Blind Girl

(Continued from Page 17)

in a bunch of zinnias of almost every color. She named the color of each and every one of them correctly. This test was especially interesting and conclusive in that it eliminated the possibility that she was able to name the color because she identified the flower rather than its hue.

When found by the field agent for the Wisconsin School for the Blind, Willetta was living with her grandmother, Mrs. E. H. Hyde, at Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, who was making a brave attempt to care for her, together with two older sisters and a younger brother. When she entered the state school, September 8, 1915, she was ten years of age. Although she had attended the public schools of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, she had been unable to get beyond the second grade. Her teachers there at first attributed her inability to learn to a natural mental dullness or "stupidity." Finally, however, the fact was forced upon one of her teachers that the child's sense of sight was defective. This handicap increased steadily until she was found by the field agent for the Wisconsin School for the Blind.

She had been in that school only a short time when the careful observation of its trained teachers developed the fact that her hearing was also defective. In spite of all that could be done for her by the best treatment available, her two handicaps made steady and discouraging progress.

"I wish to make it clear," declared Superintendent Hooper, "that every possible means was exhausted to prevent Willetta from sinking into total deafness and blindness."

Her Case Seemed Hopeless

"WHILE she could both see and hear a little we did our utmost to fortify her against complete loss of hearing and sight by teaching her everything possible which might prove a mitigation of the condition toward which she was rapidly moving. But we found her decidedly a dull pupil, unresponsive and inclined to be morose and sullen. All efforts to arouse her interest in anything were futile.

"Sometimes it seemed to her teachers, I am afraid, as if her case was rather hopeless and her disposition such as to make any work with her unpleasant as well as discouraging. Her unhappy mental condition grew worse as her hearing and her sight diminished. About the only thing which she seemed to like to do was to sew; she became fairly proficient in this.

"In October of 1919 she became totally deaf. One year later, her eyes became entirely sightless. The week following the total obliteration of her vision was a period of intense despondency to Willetta and one of great sympathetic strain on all of us who were associated with her.

"In the summer of 1920 Willetta had come in contact with a Miss Smith, then a teacher in the Day School for the Deaf in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, who took a warm interest in her

and urged her to adopt the Helen Keller method of getting the spoken word by laying her hand on the lips of the speaker.

"Her answer to this suggestion was: 'No; I don't like to touch people's lips or noses.'

"In April, 1920, Willetta received a call from a Miss Bell, then employed as a private teacher of a deaf boy in Janesville. We told her of the girl's antipathy to any attempt at practicing Helen Keller's method of placing a hand on the lips of the person with whom she wished to talk. Instantly, in the sign language, Miss Bell told Willetta of the case of a deaf and blind girl who was able to understand what people said by placing her hand firmly on top of the head of the person speaking. Miss Bell explained to Willetta that speaking caused a vibration of the bones of the one talking and that probably these vibrations would be even more distinctly felt at the throat than at the top of the head."

The New Willetta

"THIS conversation was rather indifferently received by Willetta, and she seemed disinclined to give it any test. In short, she preferred to depend upon the sign language for her communication so long as she could 'see a hand before her face.'

"This brings us to the most dramatic moment of Willetta's life, about a week after she had slipped into the abyss of total blindness and utter despondency. That week will long be remembered here in the institution. The sympathetic strain which we were all under and the apparent futility of all our efforts to relieve the girl's despair made the outlook decidedly dark for all of us. The other girls in the school felt this sympathetic strain keenly and did their utmost to relieve it. In every possible way they threw an atmosphere of comradeship about Willetta and were with her almost constantly.

"Suddenly, one morning, a teacher with whom I was talking exclaimed: 'Look at Willetta. Can't you see the change in her face, even at this distance?'

"It is rather difficult to tell how deeply I was moved at the sight which met my eyes. A little distance away from us stood Willetta with her fingers on the throat of one of her girl companions. In place of the look of black despair which had settled upon her face since she had become totally blind, was a look of animation and eager interest. As I walked towards her she broke into a girlish giggle. That just about brought the tears to my eyes. I knew that she had found the way out of her deep abyss of silence and despair.

"When I reached her side I took her hand and placed it at my own throat. Then, in an ordinary conversational tone, I asked her: 'Willetta, who is talking to you?'

"Without any hesitation whatever she answered: 'Why, Mr. Hooper.'

"At once we tried a series of experiments which developed the fact that she could

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WILLETTA IS QUITE ADEPT AT THE SEWING MACHINE—AND GUIDES THE CLOTH BY HER REMARKABLE SENSE OF TOUCH



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An Amazing Blind Girl

(Continued from Page 131)

understand almost as distinctly by placing her hand on the top of my head, on my chest or at the back of my neck as she could by resting her fingers on my vocal cords at the throat. From that instant the girl became a changed being. Her moroseness fell from her; in place of extreme despondency she became possessed of genuine cheerfulness.

"What was still more amazing, her mentality appeared to have undergone an equally radical change; instead of being slow, dull and mentally resistant, she was quick, eager and interested in almost everything which was said to her. It would be difficult to exaggerate this mental and dispositional change in Willetta. To my thought it is too important, in relation to others who are or may be similarly afflicted, to be passed without special comment. From being dull, stolid, unhappy and rather stubborn she quickly developed into a very keen, active, cheerful and willing girl. We now regard Willetta as one of the brightest pupils ever trained in the Wisconsin School for the Blind. To my mind our experience with Willetta is bound to be of great scientific and humanitarian benefit to the world. It offers conclusive proof, as I see it, that many children have been made to suffer most unnecessarily because of the blundering of parents and teachers. In other words, I am convinced that there are many pupils in the public schools of this country who are considered stupid, willful and bad-tempered simply because their physical condition is not recognized by those who are responsible for their care and development."

Challengers Answered

"THE case of Willetta seems to me a clear demonstration of the fact that the important thing is to see that every child has some clear, open and perfectly functioning line of communication with those about them; that to an unrealized degree the senses of sight, hearing, touch and smell are interchangeable; that the senses of touch and smell are capable of giving a far wider contact and communication with life than we have thus far believed them to be. Put it this way if you like: The essential requisite for the happiness and development of every human being is free, open and unhampered communication with others. Willetta's experience has proved, it seems to me, that when the two lines of communication universally depended upon to furnish that contact are 'down' and 'dead' other lines are still open to them as very serviceable substitutes.

"Probably no person has witnessed a demonstration of Willetta's remarkable ability to make the senses of touch and smell serve her as substitutes for hearing and sight without an inward challenge of the statement that she is totally deaf and blind. Therefore I am anxious to cover this point completely. She has been subjected to the most searching and conclusive tests both as to her hearing and her sight.

"Through ignorance of our subject we have wasted at least three or four years of Willetta's life. For five years we tried to educate her through the senses of hearing and sight, both of which were deficient, and we considered her subnormal because of our own blundering. When

she showed us our mistake by beginning to get her knowledge through a perfect sense, the most delicate one which any human being possesses, we found that instead of being subnormal she was a wonderful child, keen, bright, happy and tractable. Naturally this experience has raised a question: 'How many unfortunate people in this world have been retarded in their development because their teachers, their parents and they themselves have depended upon a defective sense instead of a perfect one as a means of contact and education?' Of course, it is as yet too early in the study of this case to determine how far our findings can be applied to others, but we hope before another year goes by to work with another girl, perhaps with two or three of them, with defective hearing and sight."

Can't Explain Her Process

"I HAVE been repeatedly asked if the element of mental telepathy may not play a part in Willetta's ability to understand through the sense of touch and to tell colors through the sense of smell. Without any consideration of the claims of mental telepathy, the answer to this question seems to be found in the fact that she understands nothing of what is said to her unless she catches some part of the bone structure of the speaker or holds some resilient object, like a piece of wood or metal, resting on that structure. Like most others who have come in contact with this remarkable girl, I have been curious to know whether the impression which she receives through the sense of touch is precisely the same as that which she used to receive through her ears when her hearing was at the best, or whether this impression has to be translated by her into words. She tells me that she doesn't exactly hear with her fingers, but that she gets sensations that somehow mean words to her. She is apparently unable to make any explanation of the precise process by which she translates these vibratory sensations into words. Certainly she has had no instruction in that art; it is wholly an intuitive process. This avenue of understanding is, with her, closely parallel to direct hearing; otherwise she would not enjoy music as she does. Apparently she gets a keen pleasure from placing her hand on the piano when it is played."

Because the human mind is happiest when occupied with useful employment, a vocational future is planned for this remarkable girl. Just what it will be or what line it will follow will not be determined until her education has progressed much beyond its present limit. Great care will be exercised in the

choice of the special teacher who will shortly be selected to give exclusive attention to the problems of her development. At present Willetta finds her chief vocational interest in sewing. Her use of the sewing machine is almost as deft and unhesitating as that of an experienced operator having unimpaired eyesight. With pride she showed me a silk dress on which she had done the sewing aside from those changes required in the process of fitting.

However, it would seem natural to assume that her amazingly acute sense of smell may prove to be the deciding factor in her vocational placement.



ANOTHER WAY THAT WILLETTA CAN READILY "HEAR" WHAT IS SAID TO HER

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(WILLETTA HUGGINS)

Crissey, Forrest

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